

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 PM-05 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15 CIAE-00
DODE-00 INR-10 NSAE-00 PA-01 ICA-11 IO-13 SAA-01
HA-05 /079 W
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R 131414Z JUL 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7869
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USICA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 4002

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SOPN, PEPR, SY, US, LE
SUBJ: SYRIAN EDITOR PRIVATELY PRAISES US ROLE IN LEBANON

SUMMARY: EDITOR OF SYRIAN NEWSPAPER AL-THAWRA MADE SOME
SURPRISINGLY UPBEAT REMARKS ABOUT US ROLE IN LEBANON AND
THE REGION IN THE PRESENCE OF HIS EDITORIAL STAFF. HE
VIEWED US AND SYRIAN GOALS IN LEBANON AS VERY SIMILAR AND
PLACED US ACTIONS THERE IN A POSITIVE LIGHT. HE ACCUSED
ISRAEL OF ORCHESTRATING MUCH OF THE TURMOIL IN LEBANON
AND SUGGESTED THAT SYRIA WOULD RISK WAR WITH IARAE TO
PREVENT PARTITION. HE IMPLIED THAT SARKIS WAS ULTIMATELY
EXPENDABLE. IN DISCUSSING PEACE PROCESS, HE PRAISED
PRESIDENT CARTER'S SINCERITY BUT SAID THAT INTERNAL POLITICS
PREVENTED US FROM ACTING IN ITS OWN NATIONAL INTERESTS.
ARABS, HE SAID, WANTED TO ENJOY POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC
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BENEFITS SIMILAR TO AMERICANS AND NEEDED PEACE TO ACCOMPLISH
THIS. IT APPEARS THAT DESPITE FREQUENT ANTI-US PROPAGANDA
IN SYRIAN PRESS, AMORE REALISTIC VIEW OF EVENTS MAY BE
FILTERING DOWN TO BAATHISTS IN MEDIA FOR SOME UPPER ECHELON
ELEMENTS IN THE PARTY. END SUMMARY.

1. DURING JULY 11 CALL ON NEW THAWRA EDITOR AHMAD HAJJ ALI, WHO IS

REPUTED TO BE A COMER IN THE BAATH PARTY, POLOFF WAS TREATED TO SOME SURPRISINGLY POSITIVE REMARKS ON US ROLE IN LEBANON AND THE REGION AS WELL AS MORE STANDARD RHETORIC ON SYRIA'S PERCEPTION OF REGIONAL EVENTS. WHAT MADE HIS PRESENTATION ALL THE MORE STARTLING WAS THE PRESENCE OF FIVE OF HIS SENIOR EDITORIAL STAFF IN THE ROOM. HE WAS CLEARLY BRIEFING THEM AS MUCH AS HE WAS US.

2. IN A LONGE INITIAL EXPOSE ON SYRIA'S VIEW OF THE SITUATION IN LEBANON, HAJJI ALI SAID HE REALIZED THAT US WANTED STABILITY AND PEACE IN THE REGION SINCE IT WAS IN OUR NATIONAL INTEREST. HE DID NOT BELIEVE THAT THE US WANTED TURMOIL IN LEBANON AT A TIME WHEN IT WAS TRYING TO PROMOTE A MIDEAST PEACE SETTLEMENT. IT APPEARED THAT THE US HAD BEEN AGAINST ISRAEL'S INVASION OF SOUTH LEBANON, AND IT CERTAINLY HAD BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN SECURING ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL, HOWEVER IMPERFECT. THE US AND SYRIA, IN HIS OPINION, SHARED COMMON AIMS IN LEBANON AND IT WAS DISAPPOINTING THAT SYRIA'S POLICIES THERE WERE NOT GIVEN MORE SUPPORT.

3. HE NOTED THAT SYRIA WAS NOT AGAINST THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, AND IT ENJOYED THE SUPPORT OF MANY LEBANESE CHRISTIANS TERRORIZED BY THE PHALANGE AND THE LIBERALS. BAATH PARTY IDEOLOGY WAS NON-SECTARIAN AND ARAB NATIONALISM OWED A PROFOUND DEBT TO THE ARAB CHRISTIANS OF THE REGION-- ESPECIALLY THE MARONITES WHO HAD BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN RAISING

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ARAB CONSCIOUSNESS EARLY IN THE CENTURY.

4. ISRAEL WAS TRYING TO KEEP LEBANON IN TOURMOIL AND PREOCCUPY SYRIA. HE REFERRED TO A RECENT EDITORIAL HE HAD WRITTEN WHICH CLAIMED THAT ISRAEL'S PLAN WAS BEING IMPLEMENTED DELIBERATELY AND IN STAGES TO HAVE VARIOUS PARTIES FIGHT ONE ANOTHER IN LEBANON. THE SYRIAN-RIGHTIST FIGHT WAS ONLY THE LATEST STAGE IN THE "PLOT". SYRIA WOULD NOT PERMIT PARTITION UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES SINCE A SECTARIAN ARAB STATE WOULD POSE AN EVEN GREATER THREAT TO ARAB NATIONALISM THAN DID THE CREATION OF ISAREL ISTSEF. THE CREATION OF SUCH A STATE WOULD BE NOTHING MORE THAN A PLOY TO TRY TO DIVIDE THE AREA INTO FEUDING RELIGIOUS AND NATIONAL GROUPINGS. HE IMPLIED THAT SYRIA WOULD RISK EVEN WAR WITH ISRAEL TO PREVENT THIS.

5. AFTER LISTENING TO POLOFF'S PRESENTATION OF US MOVES TO TRY TO CALM THE SITUATION IN LEBANON AND HIS AFFIRMATION THAT SYRIA AND THE US DID, INDEED, SHARE COMMON AIMS IN LEBANON DESPITE SOME DISAGREEMENTS OVER METHODS EMPLOYED, HAJJ ALI THEN ADDRESSED HIMSELF TO THE QUESTION OF SARKIS' RESIGNATION THREAT. HE SAID THAT SARKIS WAS A GOOD MAN BUT HAD BEEN

WEAK. PERHAPS, THIS WAS UNDERSTANDABLE SINCE HE HAD NO PARTY OR SOLID BASE OF SUPPORT. HE WAS AT THE MERCY OF THE MILITIAS BECAUSE OF HIS FAILURE TO ACT DECISIVELY. HE AVERRED THAT SYRIA WOULD HAVE TO PERSIST IN LEBANON EVEN IF SARKIS RESIGNED.

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ACTION NEA-10

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HA-05 /079 W

-----013201 140613Z /23

R 131414Z JUL 78
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7870
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USINT BAGHDAD
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6. TURNING AGAIN TO THE US ROLE, HE SAID THAT PRESIDENT CARTER WAS A GOOD AND SINCERE MAN BUT DID NOT APPEAR TO ENJOY GREAT POPULARITY IN THE US. ONE DAY HE WOULD MAKE A STATEMENT WELCOMED BY THE ARABS ONLY TO CONTRADICT HIMSELF THE NEXT DAY. HAJJ ALI ATTRIBUTED THIS TO PRESSURE FROM ISRAEL'S SUPPORTERS. HE SAID THAT THE US ULTIMATELY HAD MORE INTERESTS IN THE ARAB WORLD THAN IN ISRAEL BUT OUR POLITICAL SITUATION DID NOT PERMIT US TO ACT ON THIS BASIS. HE WARNED THAT WHILE THE ARAB WORLD APPEARED CALMER ON THE SURFACE THAN IN THE PAST, THE PEOPLE WERE IN TURMOIL. THEY WERE TIRED OF WAR AND WANTED A SOLUTION TO THIS PROBLEM. THEY WANTED WHAT PEOPLE IN THE US ENJOYED--MATERIAL PROSPERITY, STABILITY, FREEDOM, AND LIBERTY.

6. COMMENT: WHILE HAJJ ALI EMPLOYED MUCH STANDARE RHETORIC IN DESCRIBING THE SITUATION IN LEBANON, HE DID NOT

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RAISE THE FREQUENTLY-HEARD CHARGE THAT THE US WAS TRYING TO
DISTRACT SYRIA IN LEBANON BECAUSE OF SYRIA'S OPPOSITION TO
SADAT'S INITIATIVE. DESPITE THE FACT THAT HIS AND OTHER SYRIANS
PAPERS ARE MAKING SUCH ALLEGATIONS. HIS OVERALL COMPLIMENTARY
REMARKS ABOUT THE US DESIRE FOR A COMPREHENSIVE MIDEAST PEACE, ITS
POSITIVE ROLE IN LEBANON, AND THE WISH OF THE ARAB PEOPLE
TO ENJOY MATERIAL AND POLITICAL BENEFITS SIMILAR TO THE
SU SEEMED PRIMARILY DIRECTED TOWARD HIS EDITORIAL STAFF.
WHETHER ANY OF HIS WORDS WILL BE IMMEDIATELY REFLECTED IN
THE PAPER'S EDITORIAL POLICY IS DOUBTFUL, BUT IS IS NEVER-
THELESS ENCOURAGING TO SEE THIS SORT OF PRIVATE MESSAGE
COMING FROM THE TOP TO KEY OFFICIALS LIKE HAJJ ALI AND THROUGH
THEM TO THEIR STAFFS.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: EDITORS, DIPLOMATIC REPRESENTATIONS, MEETINGS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 13 jul 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC04002
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780288-0743
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780766/aaaacdbw.tel
Line Count: 190
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
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Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 28 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2025233
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SYRIAN EDITOR PRIVATELY PRAISES US ROLE IN LEBANON SUMMARY: EDITOR OF SYRIAN NEWSPAPER AL-THAWRA MADE SOME SURPRISINGLY UPBEAT REMARKS ABOUT US ROLE IN LEBAN
TAGS: SOPN, PEPR, SY, LE, US, (ALI, AHMAD HAJJ)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/dabc7e76-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014